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SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL MISCONCEPTIONS¹

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STUDENTS of human culture are aware that all cultural phenomena pass through a series of changes, from their inception to their general acceptance or vogue, then to their decline and finally to their extinction or loss in a mass of other phenomena. As history reveals no movement which has failed to repeat this sequence the need of constant reformation, revival, recreation, origination is apparent, and constant guard against institutionalization, corruption, ossification. This is no less true of science than of religious beliefs, of art, of social institutions; it is no less true of anthropology than of any of the older sciences. The continued vitality of anthropology depends on repeated renewal. And when I say this I do not mean the perpetual addition of new facts to our store but new deductions from those facts, new principles revealed through them, new hypotheses as tentative efforts toward the establishment of these principles. Properly speaking there is, or should be, no such thing as orthodoxy in science. Science is in danger unless she is perpetually heterodox. All that we have a right to demand is that each new principle or theory shall be based upon a sufficient study of sufficient data, and that the method pursued be sound.

In science as in other movements of the human mind we have

¹ Retiring address as President of the Anthropological Society of Washington, May 1, 1917.

seen new eras of thought opened by certain great ideas, we have seen these ideas spread, and we have seen them gradually fade away. But we must also remember that what was true in the past is also true of the present. Too many students, while clearly understanding the processes of intellectual birth, growth, and death as applied to previous ages vainly imagine that they themselves live in the era of fulfilment, that the old cycle is completed with them, and that the favorite principles of their age are the last pronouncement of truth itself, the perfect knowledge.

The thought of man in the age in which we are living is dominated both on the scientific and the philosophical side by the doctrine of evolution and powerfully influenced by the principles which Darwin associated with that doctrine, "the struggle for existence," "natural selection," "the survival of the fittest." Of course the growth and expansion of this doctrine, the *essential* truth of which no scientist, of course, doubts, has been marked by a huge amount of discussion, and supplementary hypotheses such as "Neo-Lamarckism," and "mutation" to say nothing of the Mendelian laws, have made their appearance to interest—and also to confound—the student of the subject. Judging by the past, however, we may be sure that whatever is stable in evolution will in course of time be assimilated into the thought of mankind, while the chaff will disappear and presently the world will be ready for some new intellectual upheaval, perhaps more striking still.

But, as is always the case in such movements, the original idea in the course of time has tended to certain misconstructions and has been used in an unwarrantable manner and in situations where it is entirely out of place. While this is true in its original and proper field, biology, the treatment of such perversions is the duty of the professional biologist and I shall now turn to a consideration of the theory as applied to anthropological data.

The application of the evolutionary theory to studies in physical anthropology was of course easy and natural, physical anthropology being to all intents and purposes a chapter of biology itself. Its introduction into philology we owe to those early masters who determined and ferreted out the relationships between the different

branches of Indo-European speech. Of course this work antedated in considerable measure that of Darwin himself, but it was impelled forward and the later philological theories largely propounded under stimulation from the evolutionary movement.

The new viewpoint was introduced into investigations of the culture history of mankind mainly through the labors of two distinguished writers, Herbert Spencer and the late E. B. Tylor. Spencer's treatment of human culture formed, however, only the later chapters of his great evolutionary philosophy, while Tylor's interest was and remained almost entirely anthropological.

As this method was introduced from biology it was naturally enough colored by biological conditions. And as in biology we had a sequence of living forms ascending from the single-celled animals, through multiple-celled invertebrates, vertebrates, and mammals to man, and geological evidence that these had appeared on the earth successively beginning with the simpler, it was naturally assumed that among the races of mankind we should find the same conditions, that is, certain "more primitive" races, others less primitive, and others still less primitive, until we came to those peoples who were the custodians—or the victims—of European civilization. Such a view was indeed natural and also justifiable as a general working hypothesis, but its application was accompanied by a strangely one-sided view and a blindness to other plain teachings of biology quite astonishing. For one of the plainest lessons regarding biological evolution is that among the species of a genus or the varieties of a species the most generalized are those which probably stand nearest to the type from which all are descended. Instead of allowing themselves to be guided by this fact our anthropological predecessors took the ground that that was highest developed which approached nearest to the standards of European civilization, that to which they themselves belonged, and that most primitive which diverged farthest from it. Thus western civilization existed among peoples prevailingly fair, therefore the most primitive races must be dark. Other features were also deemed to be "primitive" in proportion to their divergence from European standards. Still stranger results were produced by

applying the same standard to cultural features. It was confidently asserted that primitive man was a cannibal, that he tattooed, deformed his head, pierced his nose and ears, was promiscuous in his sexual relations, was divided into totemic clans or rather "hordes," and practised a multitude of other customs because these particular customs and usages are the ones least prominent in the west European cultural center. The idea was carried so far that theories of origin were based upon cultural elements found in one and the same tribe with other cultural elements, but selected as original because they were the ones strangest to a European. Naturally, however, as primitive peoples possessed numerous usages, customs, and beliefs of the same genus differing widely from our own, differences of opinion arose as to the most primitive among these and the order of their development, and in course of time the theorist was ready to seize upon any custom, however obscure, as the first step in an evolutionary series which he was able to elaborate at least as successfully as every other theorist. This method of approach is what Professor W. I. Thomas in his *Source Book for Social Origins* calls "the particularistic explanation of social change" and he gives some amusing examples of the extremes to which it has been carried. He mentions as

two of Hebert Spencer's great and gross errors of this character—the derivation of all the learned and artistic occupations (even that of the dancer) from the medicine-man and the assumption that ghost-worship is the origin of all spirit belief and worship (even of the worship of animals and plants).

One of the assistant sources of error is an over-earnest attempt to find in cultural elements not thoroughly understood "survivals" analogous to the vestigial characters which play such a great part in upholding the doctrine of biological evolution. But while we can not doubt that there are such things as "survivals" the investigator must first be certain that a cultural element is really such, and secondly he must assure himself that it actually does point back to just the condition which he assumes. For instance, the fact that a symbolic human sacrifice is made by a certain tribe, while suggesting that there formerly did exist a real human sacri-

fice, is not proof of that fact. It is quite conceivable that it is only a stage play such as is found in many rituals, or that it is a symbolic representation which would ultimately result in human sacrifice but has not yet reached that point. In short the survival theory has been so grossly abused that every supposed case of the kind ought to be examined with scrupulous care.

On account of this selection of the unusual and the strange it has happened unfortunately that the science of anthropology has been turned upside down. Its isolated peaks have been made the bases and the broad features which human society shares in common have been developed from these. The whole must be turned about. We must begin from that which is general and perennially recurring and from it work out all of the peculiar developments. At least the assumption should be that the general is first, the peculiar later, and the burden of proof is on him who would maintain the contrary proposition.

In order to illustrate the above point more concretely I will cite some examples of particularistic theories. First I will consider the social phenomena which have been called totemism. When European explorers first came among some of the so-called "lower races" they found what to them was a curious custom. They found these divided into certain septs or clans, each bearing a name referring to a species of animal, plant, or some other object, the members of which considered themselves parts of one large family inside of which they refused to marry. Often the animal from which the clan was named was held in peculiar regard by the members of that clan and certain observances or taboos were in vogue in regard to it. Frequently the personal names of individuals of the clan had reference to the totem animal. These features were found in so many different parts of the world and were so strange to their discoverers that our neo-evolutionist anthropologist jumped to the conclusion that we had here a really primitive feature, that in antiquity all peoples had such a social system, and that where we had anything different it was the result of later changes. And as descent in such tribes was often through the mother and that was again un-European it was assumed that the really primitive

society was matriarchal. Attempted explanations of "totemism" at once became the order of the day and along with them various ingenious theories to account for the evolution of society out of that condition. More extensive studies of the actual data served, however, to demolish this castle of cards completely. It then became apparent that all primitive peoples did not have totemism in the orthodox form, in many cases in no form at all, and that the elements entering into it were combined in numerous different ways or else were uncombined. The areas themselves proved not to be coterminous and, while totemic tribes ought, to carry out the theory, to be lowest in culture, those in North America at least were found among the highest. Dr. Goldenweiser's illuminating discussion of the whole question showed clearly that what had been called "totemism" was a complex association of elements existing elsewhere independently and may be said to have put an end to the whole theory of an evolution out of a primitive "totemism."

Frequently associated with this was another favorite particularistic theory explaining the evolution of human marriage. It was found that marriage customs among certain races were very divergent from the standard and legal monogamy, or rather monogyny, of Europe. With polygamy students were already familiar but here and there the converse condition of polyandry was found, and in still others marital privileges extended so far that there appeared to be an actual marriage of a group of men to a group of women. Here once more the strange form was seized upon as the original and a most clever theory of the evolution of human marriage devised. It was held that the anomalous marriages observed pointed to a period when intercourse between the sexes was absolutely promiscuous, that this had been succeeded by marriages between groups, this by polyandry, by polygamy, and finally by monogamy. As in so many cases of the kind one can not withhold admiration for the cleverness with which the theory was propounded and worked out, but when the basal facts upon which it rested were critically examined only another house of cards was revealed. It had to be admitted that the stage of absolute promiscuity exists nowhere today and must remain purely hypothetical, that the cases

of so-called group marriage are ridiculously few to form a base for such a structure, and that polyandry and polygamy existed side by side with monogamy, were largely to be explained by economic and social conditions, and could not be shown to be older than the monogamy which they accompanied. Finally it was observed that monogamy had already appeared in the animal series and something closely resembling it was found in our nearest anthropoid relatives. The conclusion has therefore been reached that monogamy has probably always been the normal form of human marriage, and that other forms are aberrations from this norm.

Perhaps one of the most typical as well as one of the most ingenious of particularistic theories is Spencer's explanation of the origin of religious belief. Originally, he held, man had no religion. But in his dreams he seemed to see as still living persons he knew to be dead. Accepting his dreams at their face value he therefore supposed that those who had died were still living, though in a different state from that with which they had formerly been associated. From this deduction came the belief in another world, a cult of the dead, and a reverence for those places where the dead were buried. Now it might have happened that the body of some chief was laid away upon the top of a mountain. His soul would then be supposed to be associated with that mountain, and when there was thunder and lightning there the phenomenon would be attributed to him. In this way he would become associated with celestial phenomena, and in course of time, his apotheosis having been forgotten, he would be revered as a sky god. In equally ingenious ways he shows how belief in spirits in the other phenomena of nature would arise from a simple belief in the continued life of ancestors. From the polytheism thence resulting monotheism arose through the progressive reduction of the number of beings to whom reverence was paid. Tylor's chain of evolution is much shorter and far safer. He merely assumes that the spirit world was a deduction from such natural phenomena as dreams, reflections in water, shadows, the invisible yet sensible wind, and points for confirmation to the names for soul, spirit, and so on, which are

frequently identical with or deduced from these. Frazer, attacking the question from a different angle, picks out magical practices as his point of departure and assumes that the belief in spirits or gods was subsequently introduced.

All of these theories are, it will be seen, particularistic. Each selects one particular feature from the mass of phenomena and arranges the rest in a series ending with the dominant belief of civilized men. As in the other cases, some element of belief particularly strange to so-called "civilized" people is selected to start the series, and each chain of evolution leads dutifully up to either the monotheism or the atheism of western Europe.

As in the other cases our answer to these theories is that the selection of one feature rather than another lacks validity, and that the arrangement of the evolutionary steps is arbitrary. Furthermore, instead of being scattered through different peoples which might thus be considered to represent so many distinct stages in the evolution of religion one or more of these elements are frequently found in the same tribe and all of them are found in tribes equally primitive. On the other hand most of them flourish among tribes which can hardly be considered primitive. The Haida Indians of British Columbia, for instance, might be said to have worshiped ancestors since they sent food and clothing to their dead friends through the medium of fire, they had magical practices, believed in a large number of supernatural beings, and had a belief in a celestial deity recognized as in some measure superior to all the rest. On data drawn from this one tribe each of the above theories of the origin of religion, could be established. In fact the data at hand up to this point suggest that each element thus seized upon as a point of origination has in fact had an independent and parallel history. Even in the case of our regnant monotheism it is a fair question whether it does not tie on to a belief in a sky god extending back to the earliest days of religion among men, the only change which it has undergone being the relatively greater importance and deeper spiritualization of the concept in later times.

A second error has crept into anthropology from an over-accentuation of the uniformitarian side of evolution. In order to

combat "special creation" the early champions of evolution naturally strove to minimize differences between species, genera, and so on, but in doing this they somewhat overplayed their hand, and neglected another natural law just as patent as evolution itself. Absolute uniformitarian evolution, regular movement like that of a ball rolling down hill could exist only in a world not discriminated into parts, one without definite atoms or definite individuals, a world in which one thing gradually shaded into another. Our world is not, however, of that kind. If we turn to the physical world we find that it consists of molecules and if we divide these up we have still other definite units, atoms, and that if we divide these up we have yet others, electrons. And if analysis ever goes farther there is every reason to believe that we shall still be confronted by distinct entities. Therefore, such a phenomenon, for instance, as the growth of a plant, while apparently perfectly continuous, is shown to be the successive lifting into place of these units of structure. Turning to biology we find ourselves confronted by individual organisms, each of which has its definite inception, its independent existence, and finally its extinction. Evolution certainly assumes nothing more continuous than the passage of life from parent to child, yet in the sense that the offspring is an independent entity in that sense there is a break at every generation and evolution is not and can not be an absolutely uniform process. And when we ascend higher and inquire into the evolution of human culture this fact is just as striking. It frequently happens that so many successive steps have entered into the evolution of an industry, a social organization or custom, or a ritual, that it is described as if it had been evolved after the uniformitarian pattern. Actually, however, we know that it came about by certain successive steps, each taken at some definite time and place, although we may not be able to say exactly where or when.

Closely associated with the uniformitarian view of evolution in human culture is a common notion that this evolution was unconscious. No one who has spent much time in anthropological investigations will be inclined to minimize the strength or significance

of the unconscious or subconscious element in the development of human society, but it may easily be over-emphasized. When things are done without attention the tendency is either to reproduce the habitual action without essential variation or to degeneration. A ritual repeated without a constant mental revival of its meaning will probably change slowly in time, and degenerate, but at the same time, unless the ritual is doomed to disappear *in toto*, other elements will probably be introduced, elements answering better to the living interests of the people at the time when the introduction takes place. The action of the unconscious or subconscious mind is rather towards conservation or degeneration, the positive advances which human society makes are more often through conscious application of the mental faculties. Once a new process, institution, custom, law, or belief has been accepted and become current it passes into the realm of the habitual, that is of the unconscious, and continues to benefit or injure the community in which it has taken root, perhaps for uncounted generations. Moreover it has become a precedent for other actions and beliefs which may be still better or still more harmful. It is therefore of great importance that each change introduced into the collective body be in the line of progress. Each such choice which society makes means the entering upon one road rather than another, it means one set of experiences throughout the entire future rather than another, it means one history for the entire tribe rather than another.

I will not here enter upon that ancient discussion as to whether there is any such thing as freedom of choice. The ablest minds in the philosophic world have threshed this question out in every possible detail and it would be difficult to add anything to the discussion. The weakness of the determinist attitude lies, however, in the fact that, whether the determinist feels he has proved his case or not, he acts immediately afterward as if he had not done so. We must assume the possibility of choice or else our deliberative assemblies whether political, scientific, or philosophical have no meaning whatsoever. Opinion can have no significance for the consistent fatalist.

This being understood I wish to register a protest here against the extreme uniformitarian evolutionist, and the working of the unconscious element in the development of human thought to death. Too many students of history, using this term in its broadest sense, impressed by the gradual nature of change meet new conditions and new problems in the world about them with the cynical remark that *all that* "has been thought of before," that "it has been tried and has failed," that "you can't change human nature," "that you can't hasten the processes of evolution," and that "if it is destined to happen it will happen anyhow." While such an attitude is understandable it is based on a very one-sided reading of human history. Of course it does take time to bring about change, but if we study the advances made by humanity we shall find that they have come not through any extra-mental impulse of the uniformitarian pattern but by progressive choices of individuals and collections of individuals at particular times and particular places. The assumed steady current is found to be directed and determined at every point by individual wills. It is what is called in physics a "resultant of forces" of which those individual wills are the component elements. We must not allow the fact that the accomplishment of each will is but a small increment of the general mass to blind us to the fact that it is after all the determining factor in the entire process of evolution *on its constructive side*.

And thus, for the progress of humanity and the good of the race it is necessary that the pale student, profound and cynical, learned and skeptical, phlegmatic and pessimistic, be supplemented by the man of action, the reformer, the prophet of the future. Ill informed as many of these men are on the details of the past development of their race they make up for it by an understanding of the psychology of the present, by their keen appreciation of ethical values, their sensitiveness to the better and the worse in the institutions, the processes, the laws and customs, and the beliefs of their time. The equipment of the historian of human culture—the anthropologist in the broad sense—is not to be minimized. It is an important element in determining future action, lack of which may result in unproductive and ill considered change, but its possession

guarantees no one an ability to deal with the problems of the present or introduce laws and institutions productive of future welfare for his nation or his race. Where the two types of mind are combined in due proportion we have the highest type of legislative genius.

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